

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Impact of
Student Mobility Placements (SMP)
on competencies, studies and employability







on the participant

94%

Practical professional experience

J

80%

Participate actively to conversation in a foreign language

92%

Getting acquainted with new working culture

ひし

79%

Understand work-related documents in a foreign language

89%

Communicate smoothly in a team

ひく

75%

Present in a foreign language

84%

Collaborate better in team

UU

93%

Adaptability in new situations

91%

Communicate better in an intercultural environment

ひじ

90%

Boost in self-confidence



on employment

85%

Prepared to work abroad

54%

Easier access to the labour market

84%

Better insight in own professional goals and ambition U

52

More job opportunities in Flanders

750

More enterpreunerial skills due to mobility



INTRODUCTION

An important, albeit unexplored dimension in higher education, concerns the impact, role and relevance of placements or traineeships abroad, the so-called Student Mobility Placements (SMP) funded by DG EAC of the European Commission.

That is why Epos, the Flemish national agency for the Erasmus+ programme in Flanders (Belgium), has decided to study the impact of traineeships in higher education on the further studies and professional lives of those who participated.

The results of the study are published in 2021.

References to Erasmus mobilities in the local press and social media are often limited to studying abroad, while traineeships abroad are usually not mentioned when referring to Erasmus+ mobility as a significant contribution to enhancing students' employability.

Nevertheless, a survey by VOKA[1] in 2011[2] already indicated that employers appreciate a foreign traineeship just a little higher than only a study abroad.

Several recent studies confirmed this conclusion, such as an international comparative study by C. Van Mol (2017)[3], showing that employers have a slight preference for traineeships rather than studies abroad when recruiting recent graduates, except for particular competencies.

In 2007, the Lifelong Learning programme introduced international traineeships in Erasmus, the higher education subprogramme of LLP. Erasmus was the first mobility programme to be presented (1987) and the one best known to the general public and the media but only funded studying at higher education abroad.

Until 2007, traineeships, local and international, were mainly being organised in universities of applied sciences.

The international placements were funded by the European education programme Leonardo da Vinci or by the placement provider or by the students themselves. Since introducing international traineeships for students and recent graduates, it is possible to assess these traineeships' long-term impact.

Educonsult already has experience with a similar study in Flanders (Epos, 2020)[1] and internationally (frsce, 2020)[2] on the impact of placements among learners from Vocational Education and Training (VET) organisations in Flanders and Europe. They were involved in European and international placements.

Epos has set up a research project on the impact of international placement based on a survey and interviews with students, cooperating with the research organisation Educonsult. The study aims to determine which competencies the students and recent graduates have acquired during their traineeship abroad and whether this placement impacted their further studies and employment.

It is important to mention that the research took place while the Corona crisis was hitting Flanders (September 2020 to November 2020), resulting in an adjusted methodology. The pandemic probably also impacted both the employment prospects of recent graduates and the stay of mobile students in the spring of 2020.

Because no previous impact study has been carried out previously, it is impossible to ascertain the extent to which this crisis has impacted the results presented here. However, most students in the study took part in mobility activities in years before the COVID-19 crisis.

Moreover, the impact on competencies, further studies, and employment is not measured but based on the respondents and interviewees' self-assessment.

METHODOLOGY

As far as the methodology is concerned, the research is divided into three subdivisions:



The desktop research is based on the analysis of the Erasmus-questionnaires of returning participants;



An online questionnaire, designed and disseminated by Epos;



Twentytwo in-depth interviews with former SMP participants were conducted by phone, WhatsApp, Zoom, Skype and Teams.

Epos sent out invitations to fill out the online questionnaire to all participants since 2007 who had previously agreed to be contacted for further feedback, resulting in 867 mails to LLP (2007-2013) and 3581 to Erasmus+ participants.

Unfortunately, about 40% of all email addresses were no longer in use because they were connected to the institution they once studied at.

There were 869 respondents to the questionnaire (20% response rate), 739 of whom were validated.

The questionnaire enquired if respondents would be willing to give an interview for more in-depth feedback.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESPONDENTS AND THE PLACEMENT

The majority of respondents were mobile under the Erasmus+ programme (91%), and a limited number of respondents participated under LLP.

Some general facts and figures about the respondents:

- 85% did one placement, 11% two, 2% three and 1% more than three
- Most respondents were between 20 and 30 (90%) but 10% older than 30
- 36% were men, 63% women, 1% other
- 84% did their placement during their studies and 16% were recent graduates
- For 82% of the students, the placement was embedded in the curriculum:
 - o 68% did a 3 or 4 months placement
 - 21% did a more extended placement
 - 12 % was shorter than three months (2% due to covid-19
- 85% from the recent graduates came from research universities and only 15% from universities of applied sciences
- 87% of the respondents received a grant, 5% didn't, and the others don't remember

Fields of education:

- 29% of the respondents came from the study field of health and welfare.
- 16% from business, administration and law
- 12% from arts and humanities.
- 7% from services (personal, domestic, hospitality, sports, travel, occupational, security, military and defence, protection and transport
- 6% from social sciences, journalism and information, 7% from natural sciences, mathematics and statistics
- 9% from information and communication technologies (ICTs)
- 7% from engineering, manufacturing and construction
- 5% from agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary medicine
- Only 2% came from the study field of education.

Destinations:

- 15% Netherlands
- 14% UK
- 11% Spain
- 11% France
- 9% Germany

Recent graduates are overrepresented in respondents' sample (12% vs 5% of actual participants). With these exceptions, the selection is fairly representative.





Some facts and figures about the respondents who gave an interview:

- Twenty-two participants were interviewed
- The mobilities took place from 2010 to 2020.
- Field of education:
 - Four interviewees came from health and welfare
 - o three from business and law,
 - one from education, three from social sciences,
 - four from engineering, two from natural sciences,
 - one from information and communication technologies (ICTs),
 - three from arts and humanities
 - o one from veterinary studies.
- Eleven interviewees were women, and eleven were men. One of them was a mature student who made a career switch.
- Twelve came from universities of applied sciences and ten from research universities
- Two continued their studies from a university of applied science to a research university and a PhD.
- Six interviewees did their placement after graduating, of which one from a University of Applied Sciences.
- Six are living abroad, of which three to do their PhD or Residency.
- One is working as a teacher and one as a graphic designer. An Italian student did her Master's degree in Belgium, from there a placement in the Netherlands and she has since gone back to live in Italy but works amongst others for a Belgian firm.

THE MOTIVATION FOR SMP AND CRITERIA FOR THE INTERNSHIP

Students' reasons and criteria for choosing a professional bachelor's programme are often different from those pursuing academic training. The reputation and quality of the host institution and the possibility of a European scholarship are more important for students and graduates of an academic programme.

Simultaneously, the motivation to live abroad and meet new people is more important for professional bachelors[4].

Although the traineeships went overall smoothly to very smoothly, the research nevertheless identified some returning problems:

- The most common problem was a Learning Agreement that was too vague.
- Students sometimes got far too easy assignments, or too difficult or not adapted to their studies. Some even had to design a project themselves. Some sending organisations intervened immediately to solve this kind of problem, but others waited too long or did nothing to correct it. Although this is a small minority, these few trainees were deeply disappointed with their placement. However, several of these interviewees and respondents did say that their efforts to solve this problem themselves increased their problem-solving abilities and the eventual quality of their placement.
- Another problem for some students were difficulties with accommodation. One interviewee was even a victim of accommodation fraud. Others had booked accommodation that did not meet the minimum requirements.

- The lack of local language knowledge on the trainees' part of the people they were working with also caused some minor incidents.
 Students in social or paramedical studies, interacting directly with local people or patients.
- Finally, a few students are convinced their home institution did not convert correctly their score in the final assessment of their placement abroad. This concerned students who had received a letter and no grade score.

COMPETENCES ACQUIRED

In terms of competences, almost all survey participants agreed that they had acquired practical professional competences (94%). Nearly all interviewees and many respondents pointed out that they had become self-reliant, resilient and independent during this mobility and that their problem-solving capacity and creativity had increased. Many even emphasised that this is probably the most significant added value of this international mobility.

In addition to an impact on professional skills, mobility mainly impacted so-called soft skills such as communication skills, team, intercultural and transferable skills. The respondents' self-confidence has undoubtedly had a boost, and they have experienced a corporate culture and organisation abroad that is different from the Flemish one. The respondents who took part in the mobility to improve their knowledge of a foreign language have acquired these language skills, as well written as oral.

Only slightly more than half of the participants improved their digital skills, and among the respondents who have been mobile in recent years, this is less than half. 60% of the respondents say that their interest in and commitment to European values has increased thanks to mobility.

It is noticeable that the impact on respondents who did a traineeship for four months or more is more significant than on those who stayed abroad for only two or three months. This is particularly striking for digital skills, knowledge of a foreign language and interest and commitment to European values. Recent graduates experienced a more significant impact than those who did their traineeship during their studies: the former usually stayed abroad for a more extended period up to twelve months. 85% of the respondents who did a traineeship for recent graduates were university graduates.

As far as the host countries are concerned, there is a vast difference in acquiring a foreign language between the Netherlands and France. While 94% of those who went to France improved their knowledge of a foreign language, this is only the case for 37% of those who went to the Netherlands, which is hardly surprising as Flanders and the Netherlands share Dutch as a common language.

Students appreciated it when their professional skills and competencies acquired during their studies, were appreciated by professionals in the host organisation.

Being treated as equals by other professionals and being allowed to contribute to the activities and the projects in the host organisation contributed significantly to increase the trainees' confidence. It also leads to the trainees appreciating their studies in their home country.

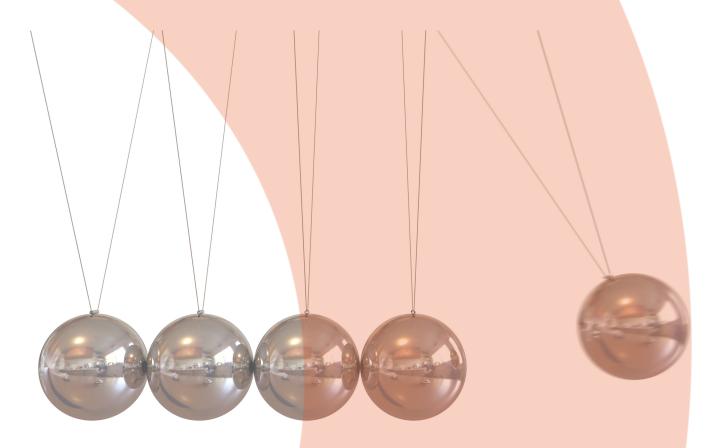


IMPACT ON STUDY RESULTS

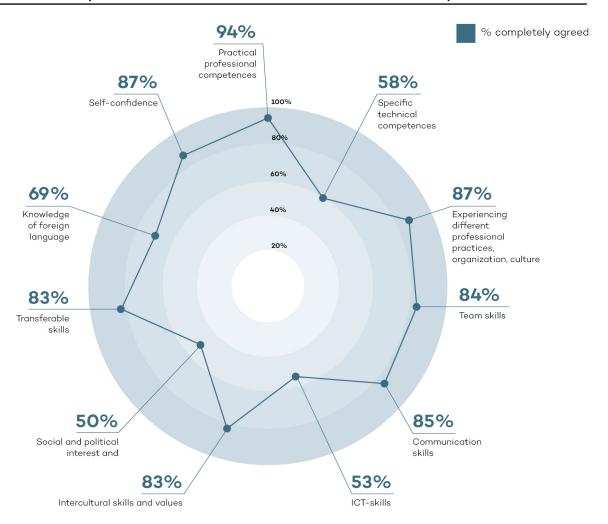
74% of the respondents stated that the traineeships had a positive impact on their study results. This percentage was lower for the self-employed (58%). However, when we don't consider the respondents who indicated 'not applicable' (probably the respondents who participated in the SMP after their studies), 88% of the respondents indicate that the traineeship had a positive impact on their study results.

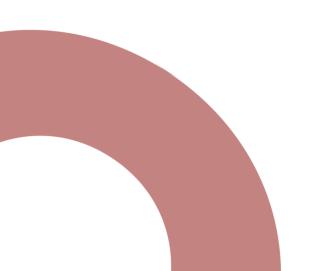
During the interviews, it became clear that several interviewees had progressed from a professional bachelor's to a master's degree and a doctorate. 25% of respondents who did a professional bachelor's degree during their traineeship are now studying for or have obtained an academic title. A potential causal link was not investigated further, although 35% of the students state that they have decided to continue studying thanks to the traineeship. The self-confidence that they had gained during the traineeship helped them make this decision.

During the interviews, several PhD students also pointed out that their traineeship in a renowned foreign institution or research institute had contributed to their ability to do a PhD or be accepted for a residency.

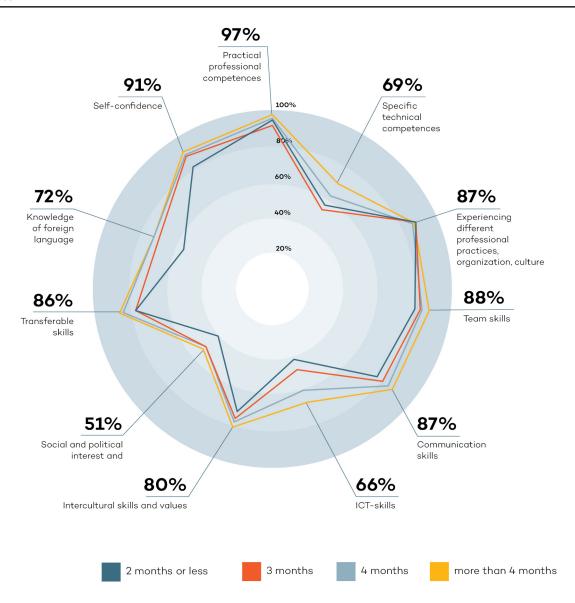


Impact on the competences, characteristics and values of the respondents





Impact on the different competences, characteristics and values according to duration



IMPACT ON EMPLOYABILITY

The survey and interviews took place in the middle of the corona pandemic, making it a lot more difficult for students who graduated in 2020 or for recent graduates to find work after their placement abroad. However, nearly two thirds (64%) of the graduate respondents pointed out that the traineeship abroad had improved their employability.

In the quantitative data and the comments, respondents indicated that the traineeship abroad mainly impacted their employment opportunities abroad (76%). 84% of the respondents are also more open to a job abroad.

The respondents also have a better idea of their professional goals and ambition. Sometimes the traineeship leads them to work in a different sector. Most of them have become more entrepreneurial thanks to the traineeship.

Although most (86%) former SMP participants tell about their traineeship when applying for a job, that percentage is lower for unemployed job seekers (79%). There are also considerable differences in terms of the assessment of labour market opportunities.

Only 39% of job-seekers who are unemployed believe that they have easier access to the labour market thanks to the foreign traineeships, while this is the case for 68% of employees and 63% of the self-employed.

60% of graduate respondents believe that it is easier for them to find a job in Flanders thanks to the internship.

The vast majority of respondents believe that the certificates they have received during their traineeship have no impact on their employability and their chances on the labour market. For example, only 20% of respondents believe that the Europass Mobility will help them find a job

100% of the self-employed and 93% of the employed are happy with their present job situation. It is not surprising that fewer job-seekers are satisfied with their current status (39%).

CONCLUSIONS

It is important to reiterate that, despite some minor issues, most participants

highly appreciated the traineeships. It has been a unique experience that has enriched their personal and professional lives and expanded their horizons beyond belief.

They have gained new knowledge and competences that certainly increase their employment opportunities in the labour market. Most have built networks that will be of considerable use in their professional careers and personal lives.

Although at least 87% of the respondents received a grant, a traineeship abroad also meant a financial effort, often made by the parents and sometimes by the students themselves.

Still, they all agreed that it is an investment in their future.

All students who received a European grant did greatly appreciate that the EU invests money in placements abroad.

Thanks to the traineeship, most students consider themselves a European citizen and a citizen of the world.

They want to contribute to society's development in their own country, in Europe and even internationally.

Over the last years, more and more respondents embraced these European values.

One of the European Commission's main aims is to support students in acquiring learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competencies) to improve their personal development, involvement in society, and employability in the European labour market. Based on this study's result, Epos can safely say the aim of the European educational programmes has been achieved.



I WAS TOLD THAT
'ERASMUS CHANGES YOUR LIFE'.
I DID NOT UNDERSTAND
AND DID NOT BELIEVE IT
UNTIL WHEN I RETURNED HOME
AFTER ERASMUS.
WITHOUT MY ERASMUS INTERNSHIP
I WOULD NOT BE WHO I AM NOW,
I WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO DO WHAT
I CAN DO NOW
AND I WOULD NOT BE ABLE
TO LOVE WHO I LOVE NOW.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows the positive impact of a work placement abroad. Higher education students or recent graduates doing their internships abroad: it broadens their horizons, it looks good on their CV, and it is a once in a lifetime opportunity with long-lasting effects.

Participants should take into account the language of the host country. Not everyone speaks English, not even in the Scandinavian countries. Sufficient knowledge of the host country's language is essential for students in the care and welfare sector who have to communicate with locals professionally and personally.

While abroad, trainees can contact the student organisation ESN in the host country. The activities of this organisation can help them build contacts and feel less lonely.

For the students who do the traineeship during their studies, the institutions must ensure that the Learning Agreement is detailed enough. The assignments must be carefully agreed upon so that there is no doubt about the student's level and the acquired competencies. They should also see to it that a mentor is on-site so that the student knows who to turn to if he or she has any questions.

Some institutions pay much attention to the promotion of SMS but much less to SMP. Several respondents pointed out that they only found out about this possibility by accident. They wanted to testify themselves about these traineeships. Particularly concerning traineeships for recent graduates, little information appears to be available. Some home institutions are reluctant to help graduates explain the correct procedure. Once they arrive at the VLUHR[1], everything seems to go smoothly. It is recommended for institutions to provide information about these traineeships for graduates and internships in European or International organisations, e.g. at the UN, the European Commission, the European Parliament[6] etc., during information days.

A clear roadmap should be drawn up in case difficulties arise. The students must know who to contact in case of problems. The institutions must foresee how they can respond as quickly as possible to issues of all kinds.

If possible, internships should last for at least three months: the internship's impact on competencies, studies and employment opportunities increases with duration.

It it striking that few students or graduates from preservice teacher education courses are mobile. A Flemish or European campaign to mobilise more students or graduates from those courses should be considered. Teacher training students can certainly do an internship in a school or an in-service training centre for teachers. They would also benefit from an internship in a company, e.g. in the service responsible for personnel training and education.

It would be useful for the home institutions, together with their partners, to draw up lists of reliable accommodation addresses to prevent students from becoming victims of accommodation fraud.

In particular young students (or inexperienced) are often lonely during traineeships abroad, unlike students who study at a university, they often do not have fellow students. Therefore, it would be good for institutions to provide buddies or host families where students can go for a weekend or talk to when they have problems or feel lonely. International accommodation facilities can help too.

Institutions can also help students and recent graduates by referring to professional organisations, student organisations such as ELSA and ESN, and European networks, of which they are members and can assist in searching for traineeships abroad.

The Europass Mobility has almost no impact on the employment opportunities of the graduates. Besides, nearly half have not received the Europass Mobility. Employers are more likely to associate this Europass Mobility with VET. Therefore, the Commission could create a placement label that includes the term Erasmus traineeship to be more associated with higher education.

It is recommended to research the impact of Erasmus+ traineeships on further studies thoroughly.

Erasmus influencers can make the Erasmus+ traineeships more attractive and better known. Several interviewees expressed their willingness to take on that role.

- [1] Flemish Network of Enterprises
- [2] El Meziane, H. (2010). Staat een internationale ervaring goed op je cv? Resultaten van de bevraging bij Voka werkgevers. Antwerpen:: VOKA
- [3] Van Mol, C.(2017). Do employers value international study and internships? A comparative analysis of 31 countries, in Geoforum, Volume 78 pp.52-60. Elsevier
- [4] From universities of applied sciences
- [5] Vlaamse universiteits- en hogescholenraad Flemish council for universities and universities of applied sciences
- [6] Placements at European institutions are ineligible for funding

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Werkgroep data-analyse - https://www.epos-vlaanderen.be/nl/downloads (go to 'Publicaties')

Survey conducted by Educonsult

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